

HUNT DIEDERICH



Whitney Museum of American Art

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Son of a Prussian cavalry officer and a painter from the illustrious Hunt family of Boston, Hunt Diederich (1884–1953) personified a fusion of two *anciens régimes*—one European, the other American. His earliest years were spent at an estate in Hungary, where his father, Colonel Ernest Diederich, bred and trained horses for the Prussian army until his death in a hunting accident in 1887. After education in Swiss schools, Hunt Diederich arrived in America around 1900 to live with his maternal grandfather, the painter William Morris Hunt. With a younger brother, he was promptly enrolled at nearby Milton Academy, but the school held little appeal for him and he left without graduating.

Diederich's artistic proclivities were manifested early in his life; he later recalled the satisfaction he felt making paper silhouettes at age five. No doubt his grandfather reinforced whatever encouragement Diederich's artist-mother had offered. In any case, he is known to have taken classes at the Boston Art School in 1903. Sketchbooks dated 1904 and 1905 show an already assured drawing technique embellishing such medieval imagery as rampant lions and knights. His monogram, WHD, is often integrated into the design, a signatory habit he maintained as an adult.

On leaving Milton, Diederich began an extended stint as a cowboy in Arizona, New Mexico, and at a cousin's ranch in Wyoming. Thus, by his late adolescence, he had lived in two very different rural societies, each governed by a protocol of animal husbandry. Romanticized motifs from each culture would inspire him for the rest of his life.

In 1906 Diederich enrolled at the venerable Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, where he studied life drawing and modeling in preparation for a career as a sculptor. Shortly after being awarded a prize for *Bronco Buster* in 1908, he was dismissed from the Academy for what the Committee on Instruction called "improper language used by him in a class composed of men and women." That summer he traveled through southern Spain with his classmate Paul Manship. Diederich then began a long sojourn in Africa, Spain, Rome, and Paris, where he studied and outfitted a studio. As a student of the sculptor Emmanuel Frémiet, Diederich received firsthand criticism from one of the preeminent *animaliers* of the French art establishment. In his choice of masters, Diederich underscored a Hunt family connection to animal sculpture. His great-uncle, Richard Morris Hunt,

architect of French Renaissance-Revival mansions for the Astors and Vanderbilts, had studied sculpture under the famous *animalier* Antoine-Louis Barye some fifty years before.

Diederich was well enough established in Paris to exhibit work in both the 1910 and 1911 spring Salons, and a large bronze group entitled *Greyhounds* received great acclaim in the 1913 Salon d'Automne. He existed comfortably in the artist's milieu of Paris, moving freely between French artists, the Polish-born Elie Nadelman, and the Russian Alexander Archipenko (in later years in New York, Nadelman and Archipenko again became Diederich's good friends). Archipenko had introduced him to a young Russian art student, Mary de Anders ("Maruschka"), whom Diederich married in 1911. Sometime after the commencement of World War I, the Diederichs moved to the United States, settling in New York; they had two children, Sybil and William.

The somewhat academic strain of Diederich's aesthetic, most completely expressed in the bronze casts he produced after returning to the States, brought him critical approval and patronage. Soon after arriving in New York, he galvanized a group of friends into helping him place a cast of *Greyhounds* on a vacant pedestal in Central Park as an offering to the city. Officials regarded the act as trespassing; the piece was unceremoniously removed and damaged by an indignant constabulary. Diederich's night-time Bohemian prank, reported widely in the local press, garnered useful publicity for his work, which was being featured at the time in a midtown gallery show.

Dogs and horses figured large in Diederich's production in these years. The lively choreography of *Playing Dogs* (c. 1916) is common to most of the larger bronzes he made before 1920. A comparably sinuous, attenuated line also distinguishes the work of Diederich's old friend Paulanship as well as that of Elie Nadelman. Diederich and Nadelman further shared a profound appreciation of folk art, which nourished the work of each.

An exhibition of Diederich's recent work at a Manhattan decorator's studio in 1917 comprised a range of distinctly utilitarian objects, such as screens, brackets, and trivets, all fashioned in wrought iron. Polo players, deer, hounds, and fighting cocks are among the silhouetted imagery decorating these essentially two-dimensional iron constructions, which showed Diederich's skill as a fluid draftsman.



Cowboy and Horse, c. 1916

Reviewing the show in the magazine *Arts and Decoration*, Guy Pène du Bois wrote approvingly of Hunt Diederich as “a decorative revolutionist with one foot in the past and the other pointing a toe at the future. It is as an inventive adapter, armed with humor and a well-developed sense of line, that he may be most interesting.”

In addition to these functional ironworks, often made with the assistance of Greenwich Village blacksmiths, Diederich also modeled in wax to preserve a feeling of spontaneity in his sculpture. He cast certain of the wax pieces, including *Cowboy and Horse* (c. 1916) and *Toreador and Bull* (c. 1916). Both exemplify hastily composed genre scenes that show Diederich trying to supersede the limits of his academic training in Philadelphia and Paris. His relentless search for the drama of the animated moment propelled him more and more toward paper silhouettes and related wrought-iron pieces, in which he found an iconic immediacy that eluded him in fully three-dimensional sculpture.

Eighty-eight pieces by Diederich were brought together for a one-artist exhibition at the Kingore Galleries in midtown Manhattan in April–May 1920. The undated wood engraving *Jockeys* was reproduced on the catalogue cover, while the small, priapically risqué bronze *L'Après-midi d'un faun* (1914) graced an interior page. Among the objects on view were screens, candlesticks, lamps, window

grates, trivets, andirons, pottery, and a weathervane. Diederich's subjects were equally wide-ranging, if familiar: cocks, horses, cats, bulls and toreadors, polo players, stags, hounds, ibex, and long-limbed thoroughbred horses—the last four certainly images from his Hungarian childhood.

From the mythic to the ordinary, Diederich consistently sought dynamic imagery, most often through compositions of animals engaged in combat or play. The paper silhouettes may have evoked his idyllic upbringing in Hungary. The larger and more substantial firescreens carried enlarged versions of these paper tableaux, the screens' inherent drama further enhanced when illuminated from behind. Many of them presented chivalrous scenes of yore; the very name "Hunt" conjured up an endless supply of exhilarating imagery.

Diederich's pro-German sentiments during World War I, attributable to his descent from Prussian nobility, did not seem to affect his social acceptance. Tall, with dark good looks and a flair for dramatic clothes he cut a memorable figure both in downtown New York and on the Continent. His forceful personality and imaginative work eventually attracted the interest of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and her lieutenant, Juliana Force, both of whom collected his art. In the late 1920s, he showed at the Whitney Studio Club (forerunner of the Whitney Museum). Since his arrival in New York he had maintained studios at various places in Greenwich Village and was well known within its precincts. He made periodic summer visits to the artists' colony at Woodstock, New York, after 1918. In addition to Manship and the émigrés Archipenko and Nadelman, he was particularly friendly with the painter George Biddle.

Diederich divorced Maruschka in 1922, marrying Countess Wanda van Goetzen the following year. While traveling in Germany in 1923 he purchased Burgthann, an eleventh-century Bavarian castle. Its restoration occupied him for many years; indeed, it became a point of focus for his restless energies.

Diederich showed work at several New York galleries throughout the 1920s and received favorable attention, including the Gold Medal of the Architectural League for design and craftsmanship in 1922. His work was also included in the influential "Art-in-Trade Exposition," organized by Macy's in 1927 in response to the famous 1925 Art Deco show in Paris, and in other landmark design exhibitions in New York. His pieces in ceramic

were well received and featured in the “International Exhibition of Ceramic Art” organized by The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1928.

That same year Diederich fell from scaffolding at Burgthann, incurring a deep cut to his right ankle that damaged the bone and never properly healed. Recurrent infections required hospitalization, and doctors periodically urged him to have the leg amputated. He always refused, but the frequent pain and incapacity he suffered diminished his artistic production and aggravated his characteristic eccentricity.

During the 1930s, Diederich’s paper silhouettes coarsened somewhat, while his animal bronzes were uninspired reprises of work he had done fifteen years before. The wrought-iron pieces, however, retained the elegant sensuality that had so distinguished his earlier work. Later in the



Chandelier, c. 1920

decade, he executed a staircase and a balcony railing, both for estates on Long Island's North Shore. Although these received acclaim and he did win some public commissions, including work for the Central Park Zoo, Diederich did not secure patrons of the means and influence that his friend Manship seemed to attract so effortlessly.

Diederich's second marriage produced two children, Diana and Harold Michael. The family often resided in Germany or Spain. But Diederich remained on good terms with his first wife, staying with her and his other two children during visits to Paris and New York. Diederich and his second family moved to Coyoacán, near Mexico City, in 1937, in search of cheap living conditions and, after war broke out in 1939, for metal, which had become increasingly scarce. The family returned to New York in 1941 to a house in Tappan, northwest of the city.

Diederich's long stays first in Weimar, then in Fascist Germany had not disabused him of his old pro-German stance. As his health deteriorated further, his mental balance gave way. In 1947, he sent out anti-Semitic material by mail in envelopes marked "with compliments from Members of the National Institute of Arts and Letters." The United States Justice Department failed in its efforts to prosecute him, but he was expelled from the Institute. In 1951 his wife, Wanda, died. Within a year his youngest son was killed in the Korean War, and his first wife died as well. Although he produced little in the last years of his life, Diederich received a commission for a large-scale bas-relief for the ASPCA headquarters in Manhattan. He was working on the project at the time of his death on May 14, 1953.

Diederich's politics have cast a retrospective pall over his artistic accomplishment, the disgrace of his final years obscuring appreciation of a unique and truly delightful body of work. Modernist-derived injunctions against decoration have also complicated reassessments of Diederich's sculpture. But Diederich's achievement, especially in the 1920s, should be acknowledged, lest we diminish our understanding of a rich moment in American art history. As with Nadelman, Diederich's stylistic freedoms signaled the emergence of a newly liberated figurative sculpture, one that, while rooted in the past, speaks to the twentieth century.

RICHARD ARMSTRONG
Curator

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth. Sight refers to dimensions measured within the frame or mat opening.

Might and Right, 1909

Cast bronze, 6 x 3 x 3

Conner-Rosenkranz, New York

L'Après-midi d'un faun, 1914

Cast bronze, 12 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 5 $\frac{1}{4}$

Collection of Diana Diederich Blake

Cowboy and Horse, c. 1916

Cast bronze, 6 x 4 $\frac{1}{2}$

Wendy S. Hoff Fine Arts, New York

Playing Dogs, c. 1916

Bronze on marble base, 15 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 31 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 11 overall

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;

Purchase 31.14a-b

Toreador and Bull, c. 1916

Cast bronze, 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ high

Collection of Mrs. Paula Trueman

Trivet (Two Horses Intertwined), c. 1916

Sheet metal, 9 diameter

Private collection

Chandelier, c. 1920

Wrought iron, 40 x 30 x 30

The Newark Museum, New Jersey; Gift of Herman A.E. and

Paul C. Jaehne, 1939

Design for a Fireplace Screen, c. 1920

Crayon on paper, 30 x 40

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Gift of Frederic

Newlin Price, 1955

Designs for Ironwork: Four Cats, c. 1920

Paper silhouette mounted on paper, 14 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 19 $\frac{1}{4}$

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Mary Martin

Fund, 1967

Equestrienne and Falcon, c. 1920

Paper silhouette mounted on paper, 14 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 12 $\frac{1}{2}$

Collection of Diana Diederich Blake

Fighting Goats, c. 1920

Paper silhouette mounted on paper, 14¼ x 11

Collection of Diana Diederich Blake

Fox and Hound, c. 1920

Paper silhouette mounted on paper, 8¾ x 9½ (sight)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Mary Martin Fund, 1967

Gazelle and Hound, c. 1920

Paper silhouette mounted on paper, 14¼ x 19¼

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, Edward C. Moore, Jr., Gift, 1922

Gazelle and Two Hounds, c. 1920

Paper silhouette mounted on paper, 14¼ x 19¼

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, Edward C. Moore, Jr., Gift, 1922

Huntsman with Horn and Hounds, c. 1920

Paper silhouette mounted on paper, 14½ x 12½

Collection of Diana Diederich Blake

The Sleigh, c. 1920

Paper silhouette mounted on paper, 14¼ x 19¼

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, Edward C. Moore, Jr., Gift, 1922

A Spanish Cavalier, c. 1920

Paper silhouette mounted on paper, 14¼ x 19¼

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, Edward C. Moore, Jr., Gift, 1922

The Sulky, c. 1920

Paper silhouette mounted on paper, 14¼ x 19¼

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, Edward C. Moore, Jr., Gift, 1922

Torchières, c. 1920

Wrought iron, two parts, each 51½ high, 17½ diameter at top

Collection of Diana Diederich Blake

Two Gazelles, c. 1920

Paper silhouette mounted on paper, 14¼ x 19¼

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, Edward C. Moore, Jr., Gift, 1922

Youth with Two Hounds, c. 1920

Paper silhouette mounted on paper, 14¼ x 19¼

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, Edward C. Moore, Jr., Gift, 1922



Cock, c. 1930

Archer, c. 1922

Paper silhouette mounted on paper, $6\frac{1}{16} \times 9\frac{5}{16}$ (sight)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the John I.H. Baur Purchase Fund 87.48

Fighting Cocks, 1925

Glazed ceramic, $14\frac{1}{8}$ diameter

Collection of Daniel Morris and Denis Gallion; courtesy Historical Design Collection, New York

Candle Stand, c. 1925

Wrought iron, $78\frac{1}{2}$ high

The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection; courtesy The Wolfsonian Foundation, Miami

Firescreen, c. 1925

Wrought iron, sheet metal, and mesh, $30\frac{1}{2} \times 57\frac{7}{8}$

Private collection; courtesy Vanderwoude Tananbaum Gallery, New York

Firescreen (Fighting Cocks), c. 1925

Wrought iron, sheet metal, and mesh, 32 x 60

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Slater

Firescreen (Four Hounds and Antlered Stag), c. 1925

Wrought iron, sheet metal, and mesh, 28¾ x 51

Collection of Dr. and Mrs. John P. Lyden

Firescreen (Peasant Boy Leading Horse), c. 1925

Wrought iron, sheet metal, and mesh, 36½ x 40 x 7½

Collection of W.H. Diederich

Firescreen (Two Greyhounds with Studded Collars), c. 1925

Wrought iron, sheet metal, and mesh, 31 x 39

Private collection

Fox and Ibex, c. 1925

Sheet metal, 7½ x 24

Collection of W.H. Diederich

Horse with Wild Mane, c. 1925

Pen and ink on paper, 11 x 8½

Vanderwoude Tananbaum Gallery, New York

Mouse and Rooster Weathervane, c. 1925

Wrought iron, 34 x 40 x 20¼

Collection of Robert and Mazal Schonfeld

Three Polo Players on Shelf, c. 1925

Sheet metal, 10 x 19 x 5

Collection of W.H. Diederich

Trivet (Fox and Dog in Square), c. 1925

Sheet metal, ½ x 9⅛ x 8¾

Collection of W.H. Diederich

Trivet (Three Dogs in Hexagon), c. 1925

Sheet metal, ¾ x 10 x 9

Collection of W.H. Diederich

Two Horses and Rabbit, c. 1925

Sheet metal, 11 diameter

Collection of W.H. Diederich

Two Polo Players, c. 1925

Paper silhouette mounted on paper, 8 x 16½

Collection of Susan Diederich

Two Stags, c. 1925

Paper silhouette mounted on paper, 11⅛ x 9¾

Private collection

Untitled (Cowboy on Horseback), c. 1925

Paper silhouette mounted on paper, 9½ x 7

Private collection

Untitled (Iceskaters), c. 1925

Paper silhouette mounted on paper, 6½ x 9

Private collection

Untitled (Polo Players), c. 1925

Paper silhouette mounted on paper, 8¼ x 7⅝

Beth Urdang Fine Art, Chicago

Mountain Goats, 1926

Glazed ceramic, 14½ diameter

Collection of Daniel Morris and Denis Gallion; courtesy Historical Design Collection, New York

Greyhounds, 1930

Glazed ceramic, 14¼ diameter

Woodstock Artists Association Permanent Collection,
Woodstock, New York; Gift of Peter Whitehead

Mountain Goats, 1930

Glazed ceramic, 16½ diameter

Woodstock Artists Association Permanent Collection,
Woodstock, New York; Gift of Peter Whitehead

Prancing Horses, 1930

Glazed ceramic, 14¾ diameter

Woodstock Artists Association Permanent Collection,
Woodstock, New York; Gift of Peter Whitehead



The Sulky, c. 1920

Cock, c. 1930

Sheet metal, wood, and nails, 26 x 15 x 9⁷/₈

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Mr. and Mrs.
Lawrence Rill Schumann 56.31

Table, c. 1930

Sheet metal with glass top, 18 x 23¹/₂ x 15¹/₂

Collection of Flora Miller Biddle

Greyhounds, n.d.

Wood engraving, 5⁷/₈ x 9¹/₂

The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations;
Print Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints
and Photographs

Hare and Horses, n.d.

Paper silhouette mounted on paper, 10¹/₂ diameter

Woodstock Artists Association Permanent Collection,
Woodstock, New York; Gift of Andrea Ruellan

Hounds in Leash, n.d.

Wood engraving, 10¹/₂ x 13

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Print Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints
and Photographs

Jockeys, n.d.

Wood engraving, 10¹/₂ x 7¹/₄

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and Photographs

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